

Growing Up Online
Impact on Student Mental Health

Kelly Allen, Dr. Jeffrey Lane, and Dr. Niki Natarajan

New Jersey School Boards Association's Workshop 2026

RUTGERS

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Goals for Today's Session

To increase understanding of trends in youth social media use and online behavior.

To examine data to understand the impact of social media use on students.

To explore policy considerations and practical strategies that promote student well-being and engagement.



Lower Cape May Regional School District
Photo Credit: New Jersey Department of Education

Pulse Check

Raise Your Hand If You Currently Use Social Media

Raise Your Hand If You Used Social Media in High School

Approximately **95%** of High School-Aged Youth Use Social Media

20% of Those Students Report **"Almost Constant"** Social Media Use

Vogels et al., 2022

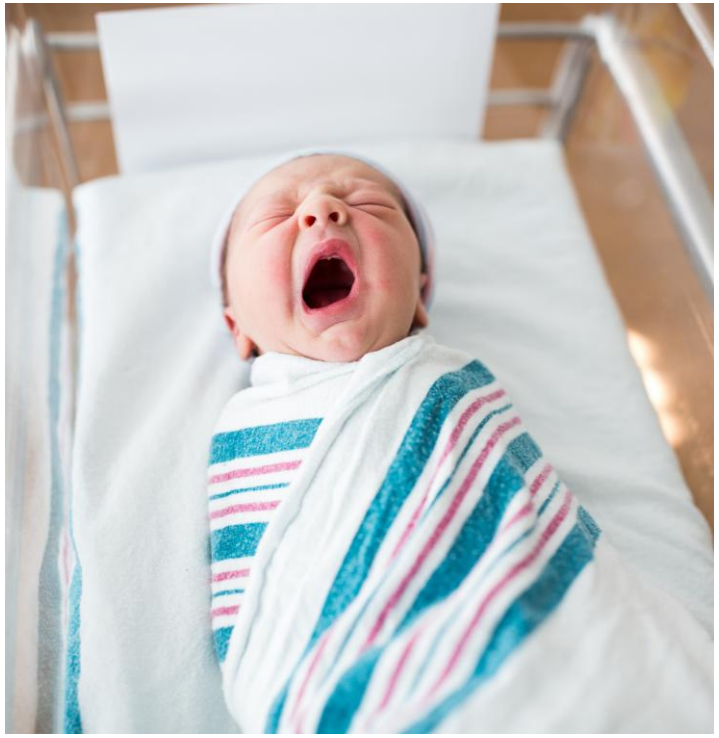
Looking Back at the Beginning

[thefacebook]

2004



2007

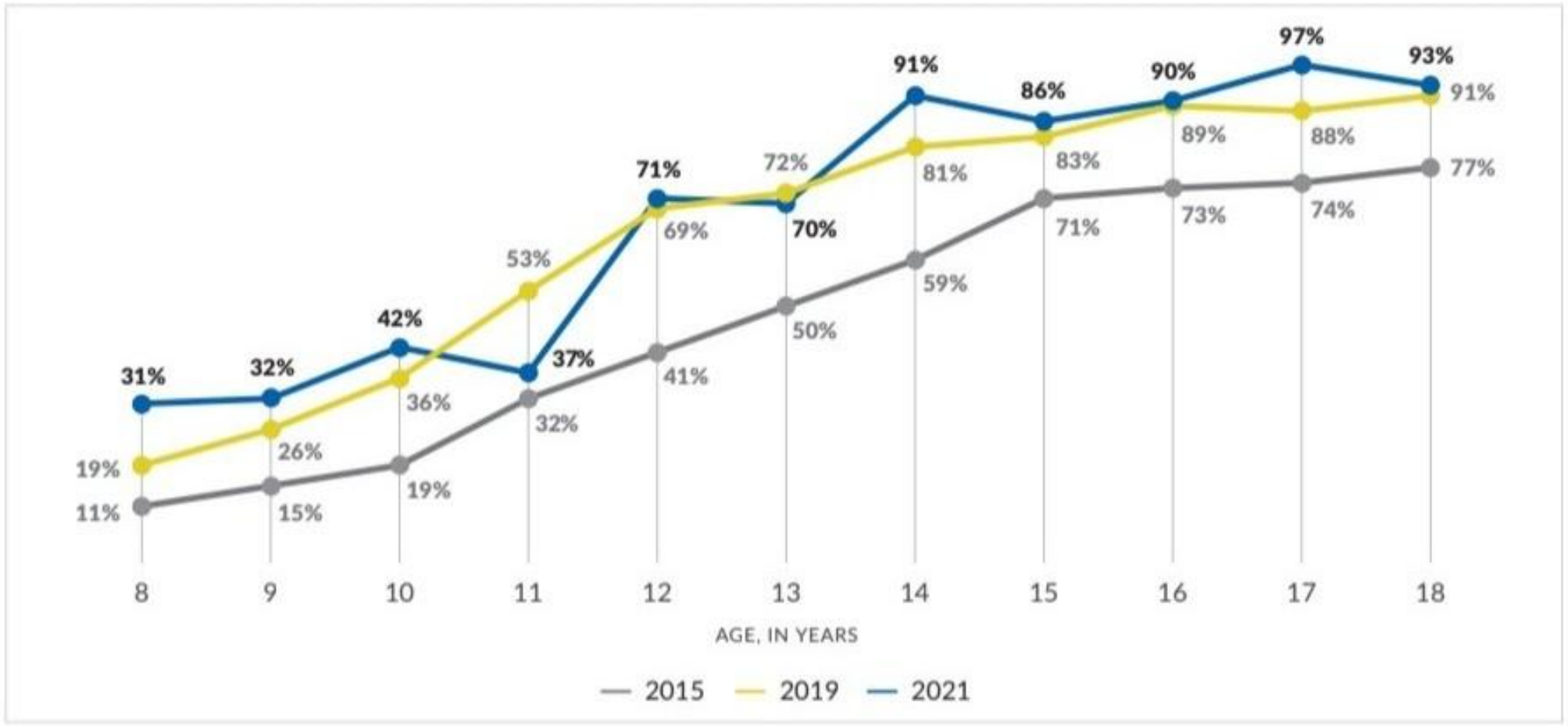


2008 and Later

Medium.com/BusinessInsider.com/Adobe Stock Image

Social Media Use National Trends Among Youth

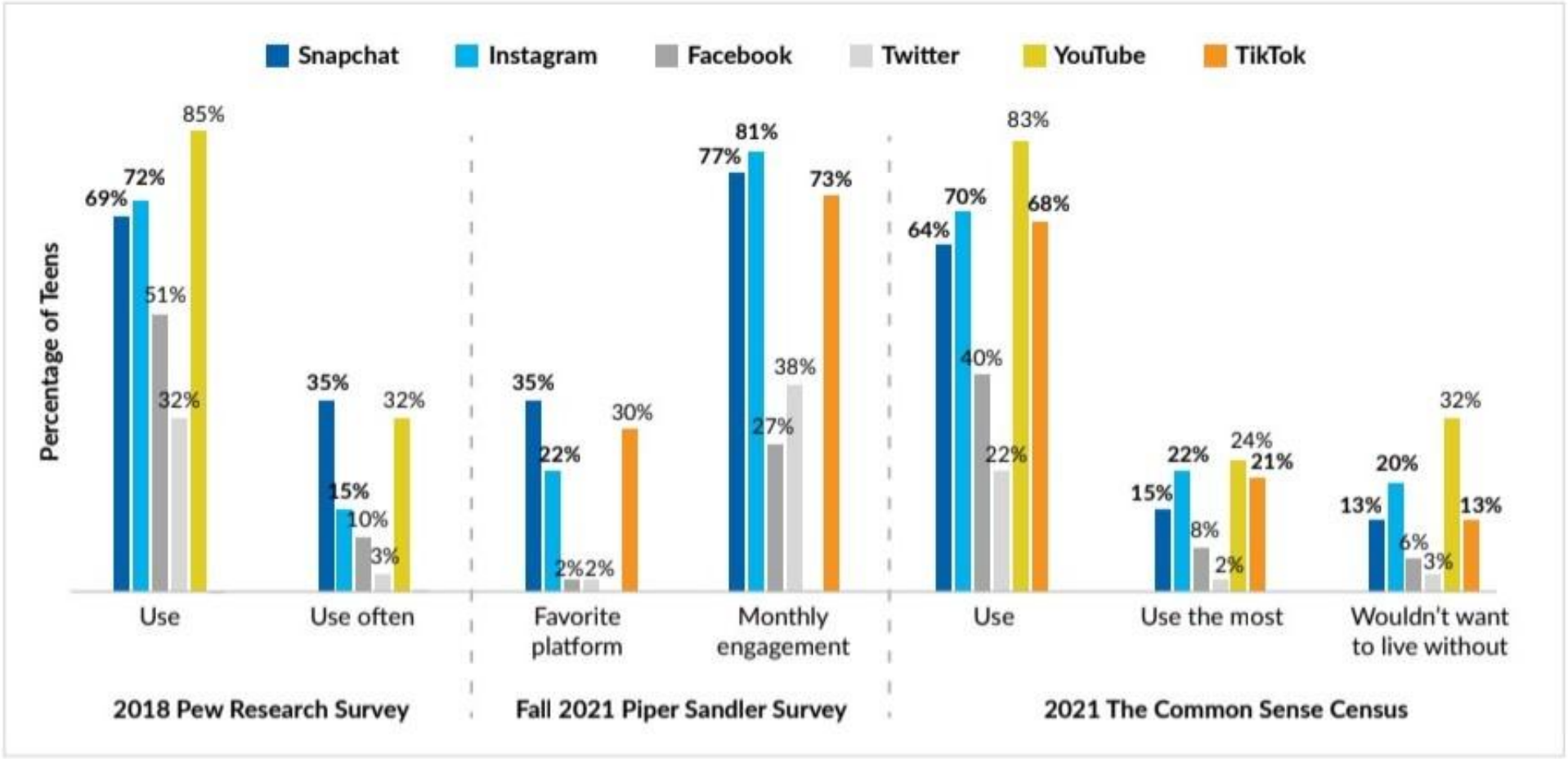
Smartphone Ownership by Children's Age
2015-2021



Common Sense Media, 2021

Percentage of Teenagers by Social Media Platform Usage

Three National Surveys (2018 vs. 2021)



Common Sense Media, 2021

Snapshot: Teen Social Media Use

Teens Receive a Median of **237 Notifications** a Day

25% of Adolescents Spend **Over 2 Hours on Phones During School**

65.5% of Teens Report Using Social Media After 9pm

Research indicates that negative impacts of social media use are most prevalent in youth who spend at least 4 hours per day on social media.

NJ Social Media Commission, 2025

Impact of Social Media Use on Youth

Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage on Adolescents

Established by *P.L.* 2023, *c.* 126.

Comprised of educators, health experts, parents, students, and policy makers.

Convened in September 2024.

To study the extent of social media usage in and out of public schools and to determine the effects that use has on the health and academic performance of students.

Key Findings
Impact on Youth Mental Health

Adolescents who use social media for more than 3 hours per day have **double the risk of depression and anxiety**.

Passive social media use linked to **negative feelings of social comparison**, feeling **left out**, & feeling **worse about their own lives**.

High levels of social media use is a **risk factor for loneliness**, which may be a precursor to mental health issues.

Social media use among adolescents contributes to anxiety, depression, and body image concerns.

NJ Social Media Commission, 2025







Research Team, The Teens, Family, and Technology Lab @ Rutgers University





STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY



The Rutgers-Eagleton/SSRS
Garden State Panel

Rutgers-Eagleton | SSRS
Garden State
Panel

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NJ Parents & Teens

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Office for Research

Research Partners & Collaborators

2025 NJ Teens and Parents Survey

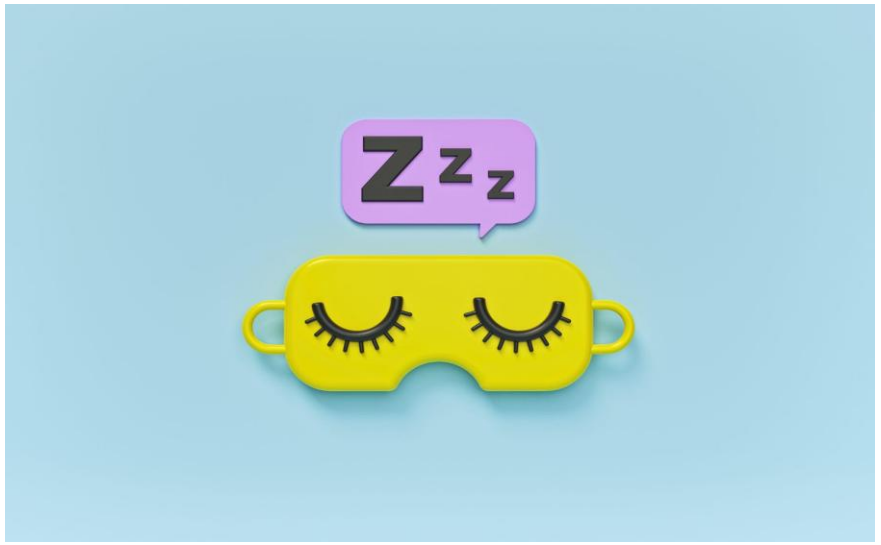
New Jersey parents and teens were surveyed online about adolescent social media use through the Rutgers-Eagleton|SSRS Garden State in June and July of 2025

- 923 parents were surveyed, and a subsample of 202 teens of the surveyed parents were also surveyed
- Of the 923 parents, 589 parents reported that their child uses social media and 334 parents reported that their child does not use social media or they didn't know if their child uses social media
- Of the 202 teens, 200 reported that they use social media and 2 reported that they do not use social media

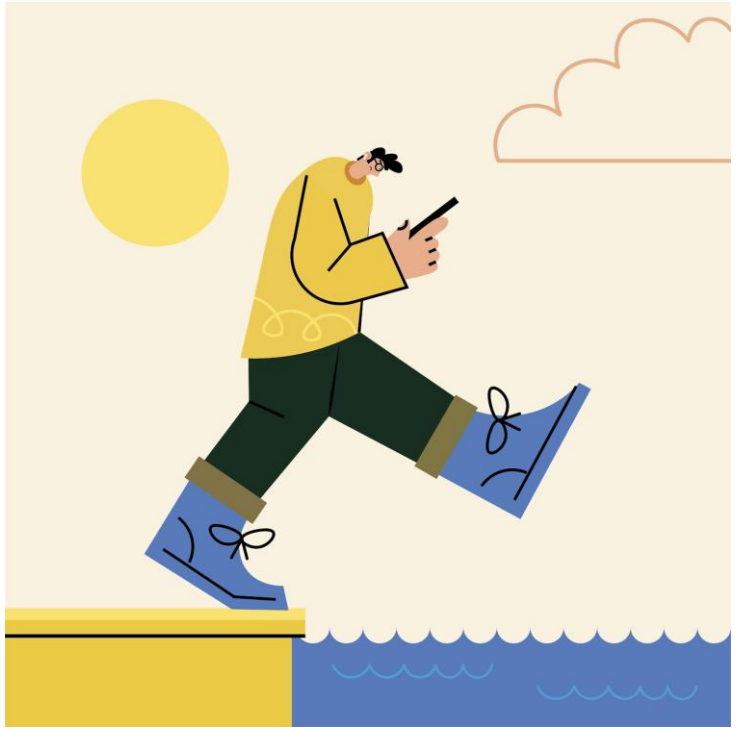
At the end of the survey, parents and teens were invited to offer their own advice about teen social media use.

The 3 Big Concerns

Sleep, Physical Activity, Attention Span







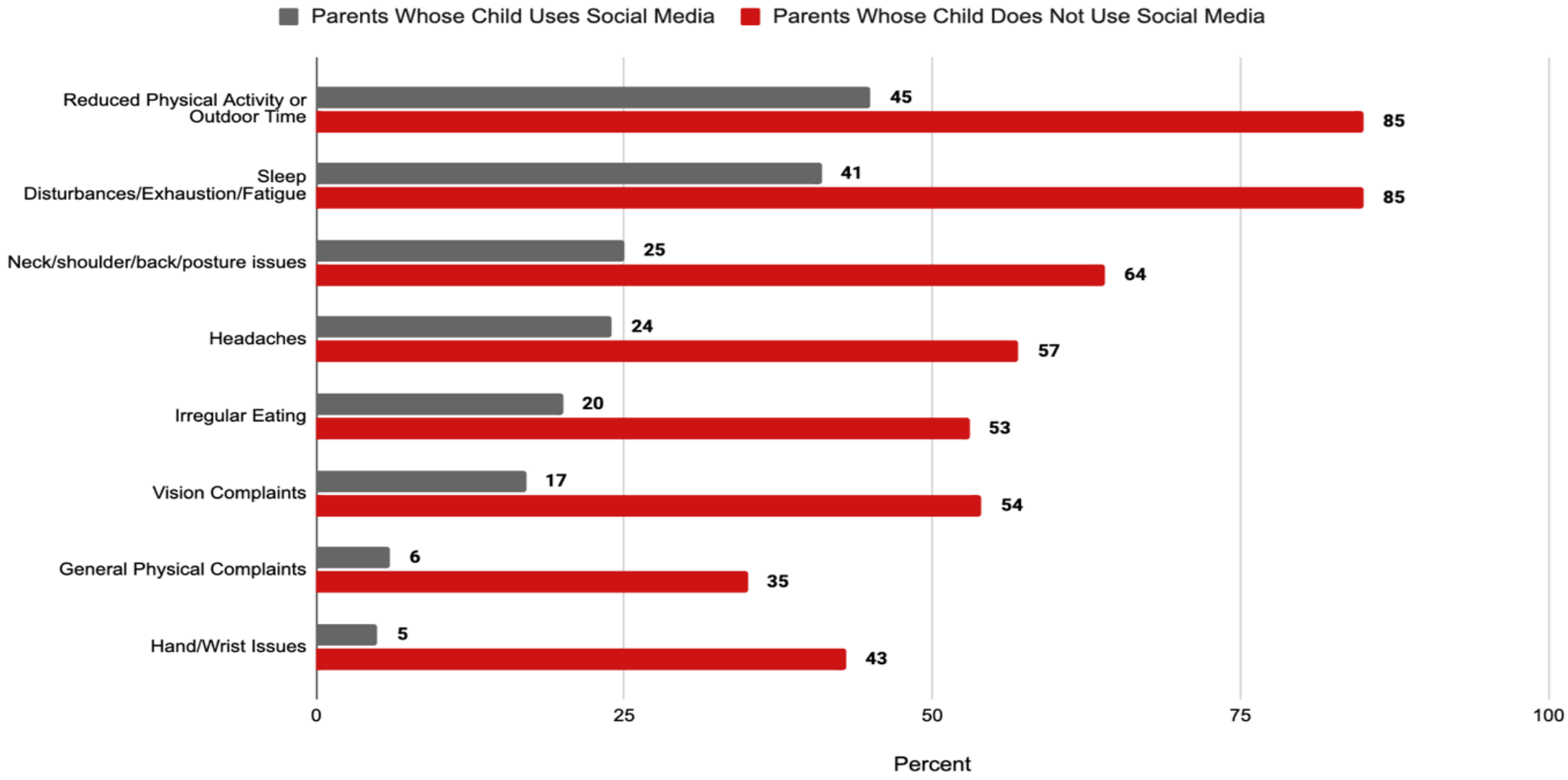
Physical Impacts

Parents of non-social media users express greater concerns about physical consequences of teen social media use.

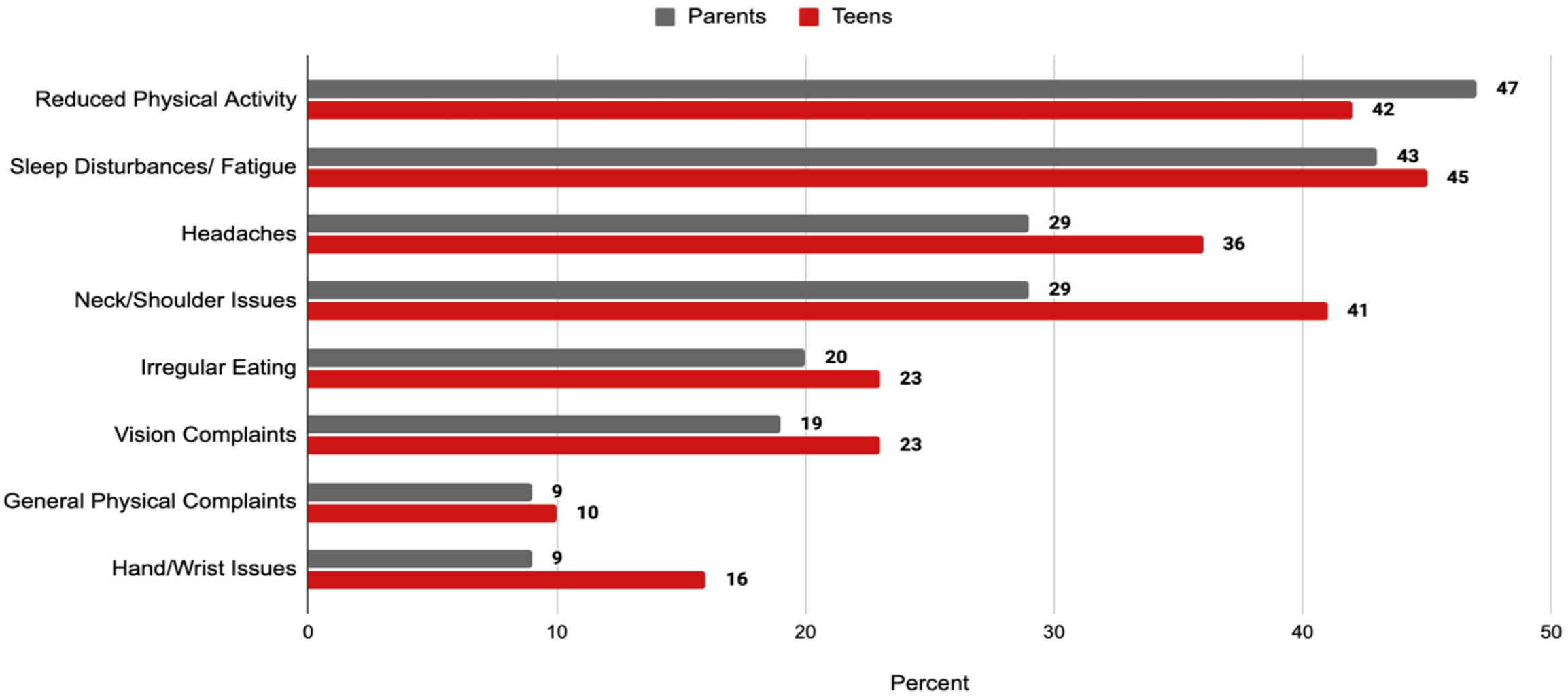
Their concerns, though amplified, mirror those of parents of social media users.

Teens and parents report sleep disturbance and reduced physical activity as the top 2 symptoms after heavy social media use.

Percent of Parents Who Report Physical Symptoms After Teens' Heavy Social Media Use



Percent Who Report the Following Physical Symptoms After Heavy Social Media Use

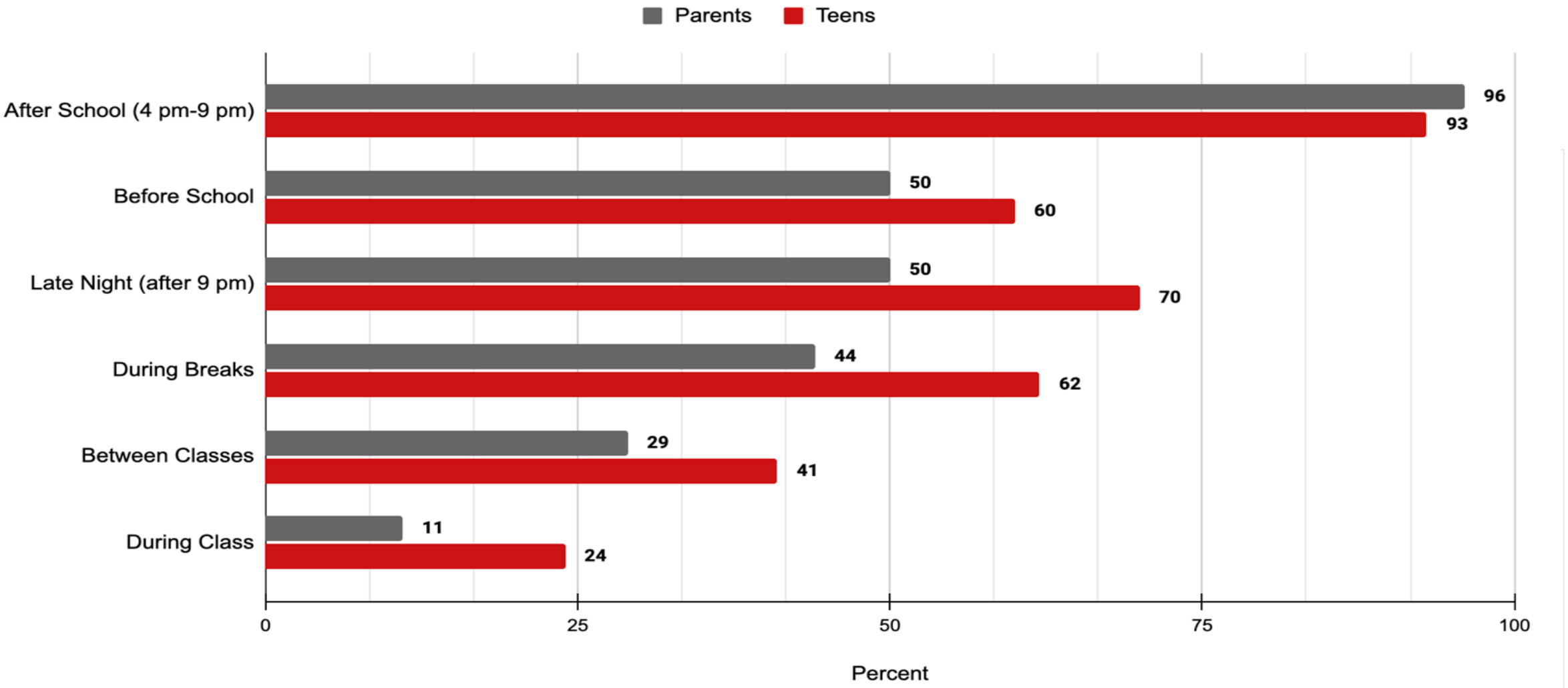


Time Spent

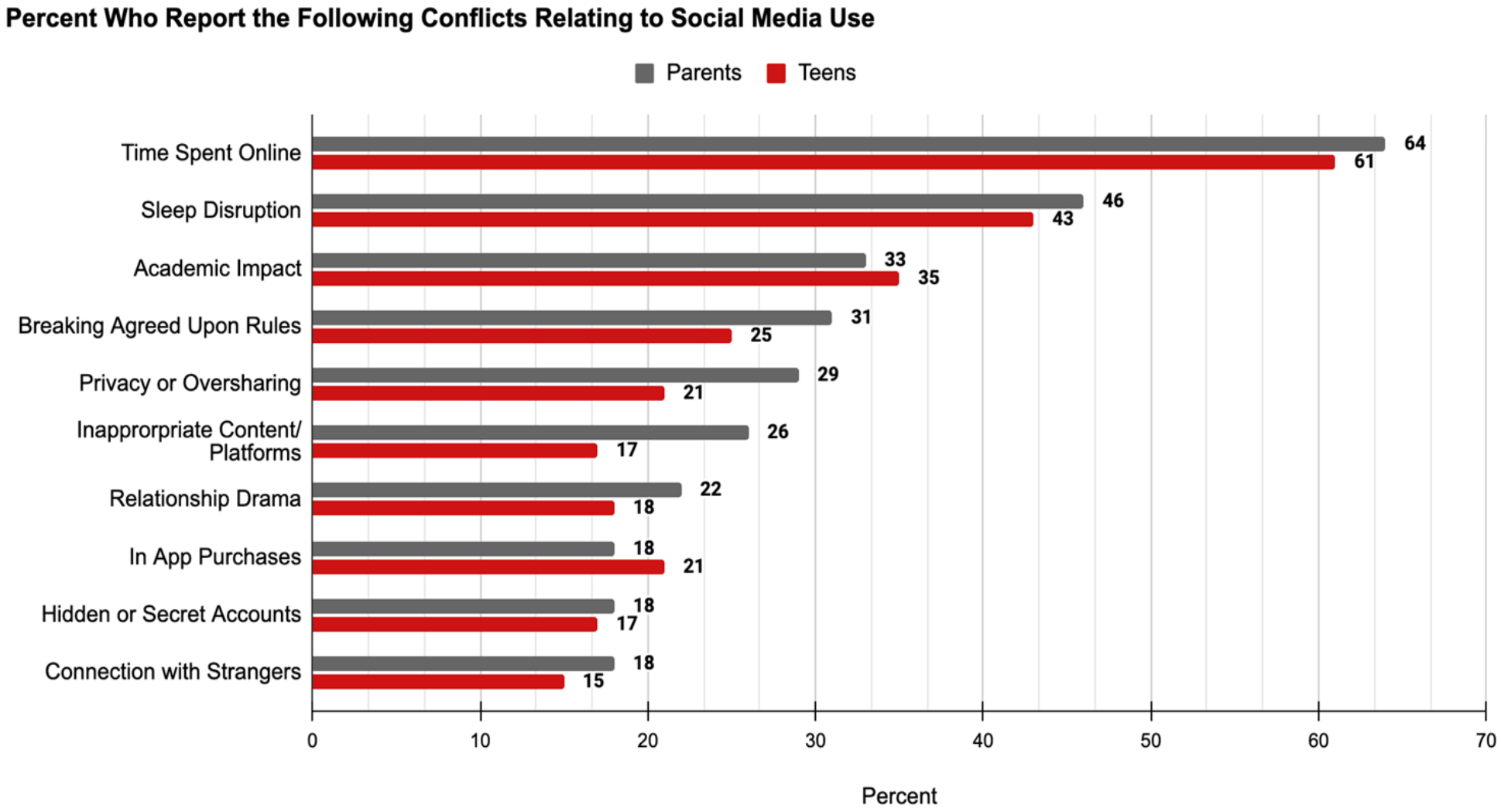
Fewer parents, compared to teens, were aware of the amount of time their teens spent on social media before school, late at night, during breaks at school*, between classes*, and during class.*

*Note that this survey was conducted the year before the new school bell-to-bell phone ban arrived.

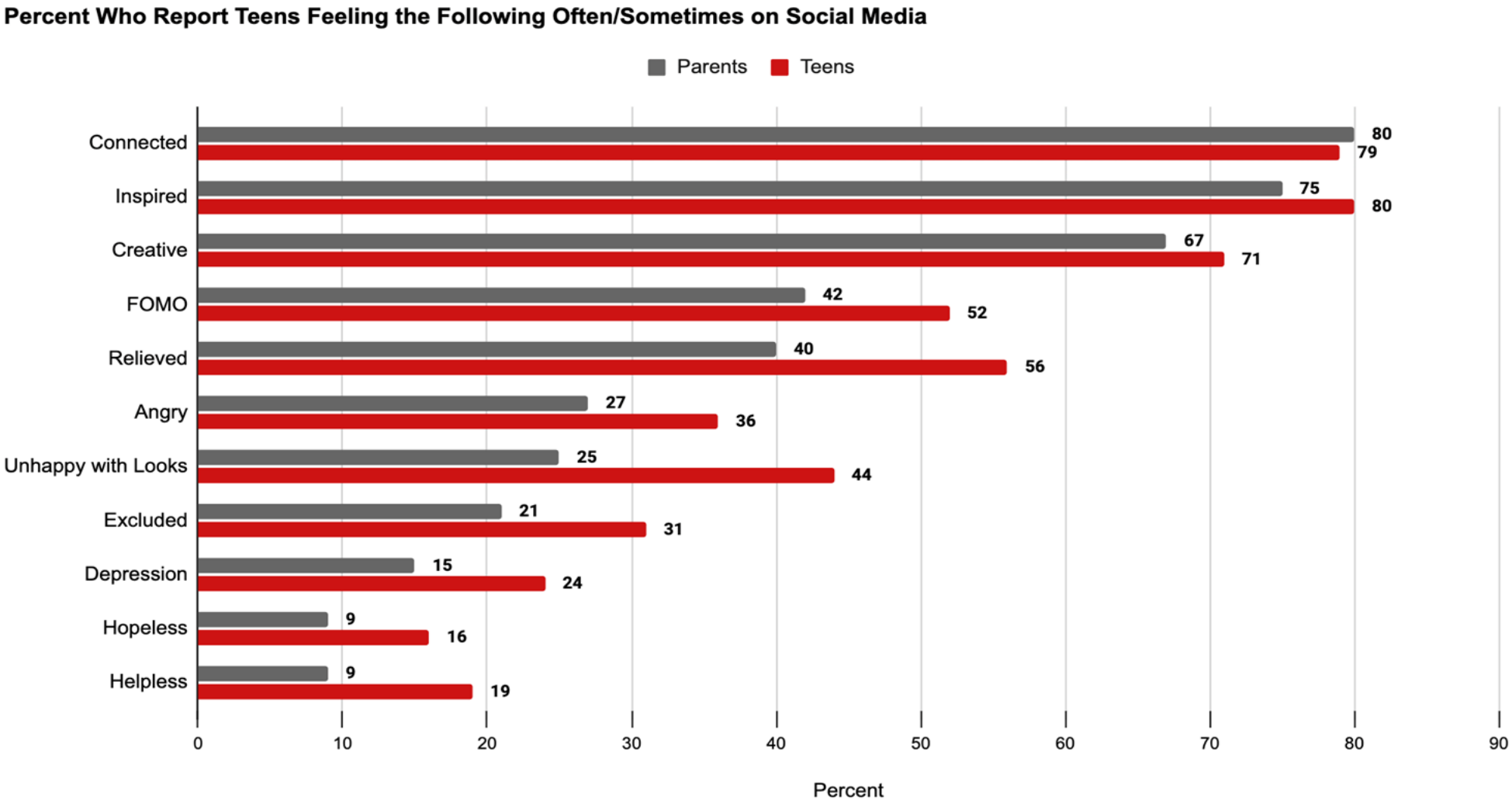
Percent of Social Media Use at Different Times



Family Conflicts



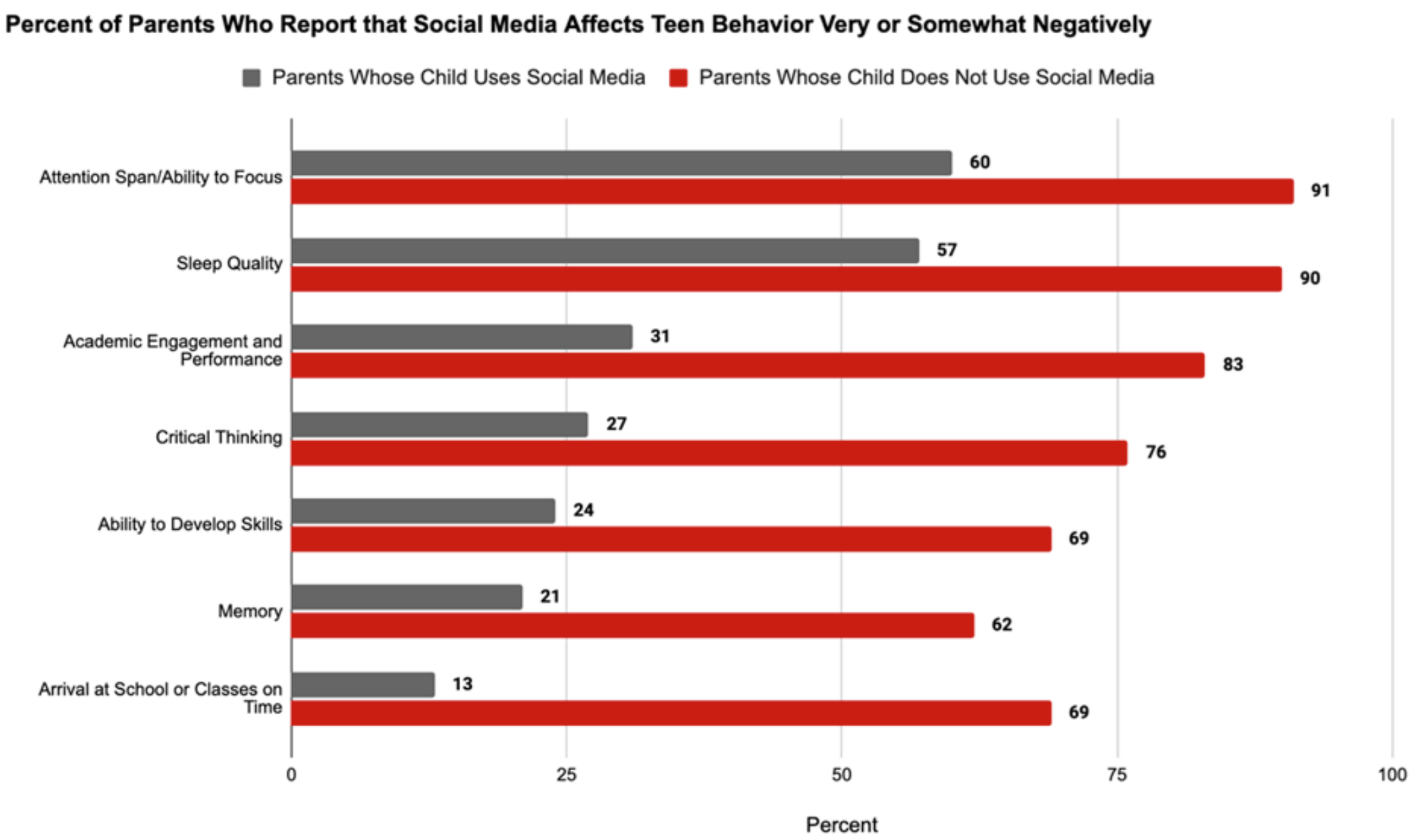
Impact on Emotional Well-Being



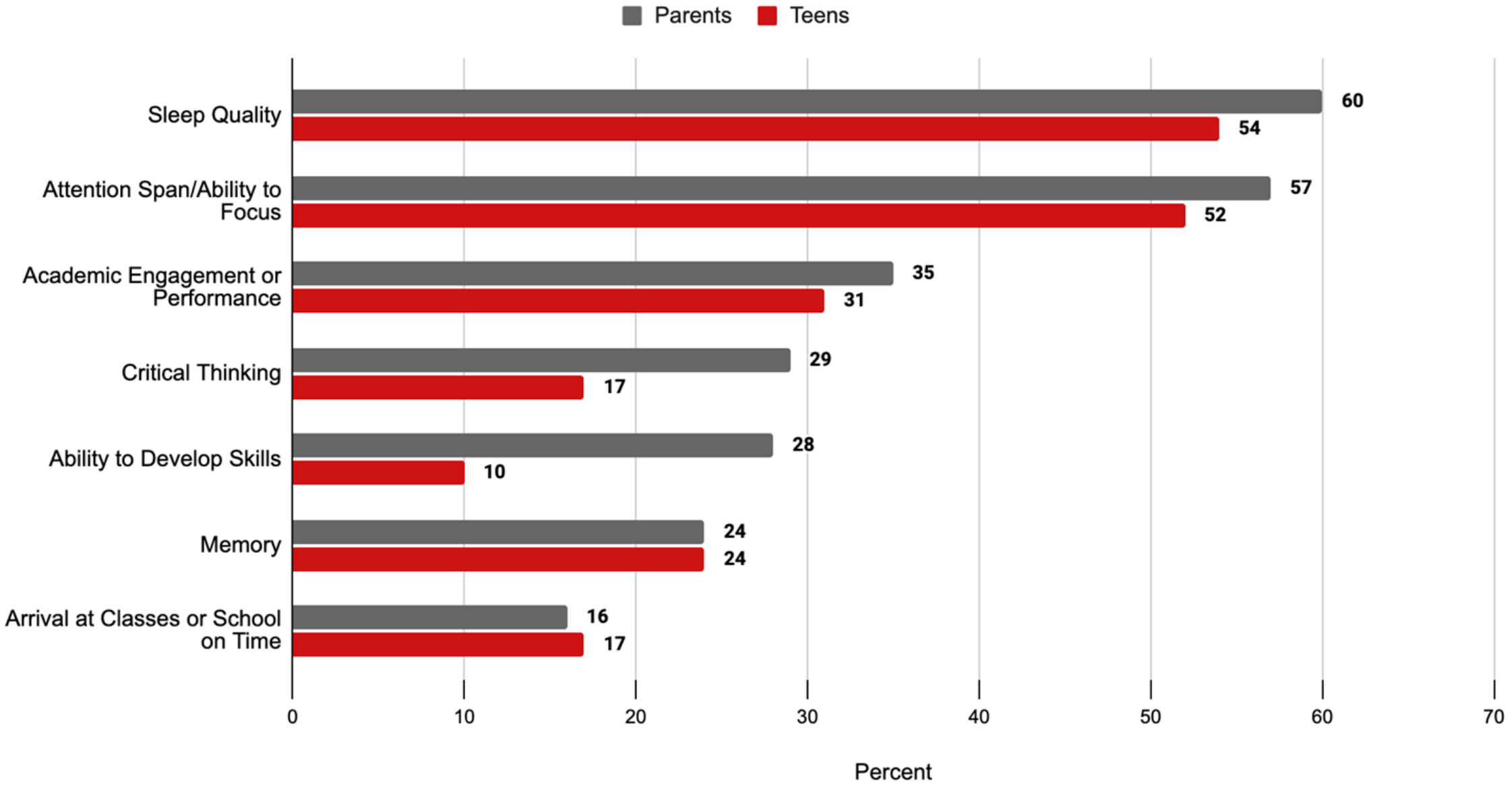
Academic-related Behaviors & Attention Span

When asked about various ways in which social media affects teens' academic-related behaviors, both parents and teens reported that the greatest negative impacts are on teens' attention span/ability to focus, and sleep quality.

Here too, parents whose teens don't use social media were more worried on each topic area, but their concerns mirrored those of social media users' parents.


Percent of Parents Who Report that Social Media Affects Teen Behavior Very or Somewhat Negatively
Parents Whose Child Uses Social Media
Parents Whose Child Does Not Use Social Media
Attention Span/Ability to Focus
60
91
Sleep Quality
57
90
Academic Engagement and Performance
31
83
Critical Thinking
27
76
Ability to Develop Skills
24
69
Memory
21
62
Arrival at School or Classes on Time
13
69
0
25
50
75
100
Percent

Percent Who Report That Social Media Affects The Following Behaviors Very or Somewhat Negatively



In Their Own Words:
Teens' and Parents' Advice

Teens' Advice on Social Media Use

Advice Themes (counts)

- Safety & Privacy (31)
- Balance & Addiction Awareness (17)
- Well-Being (12)
- Positive Peer Interaction (9)
- Digital Permanence (8)

"Even though it doesn't feel like it, social media is a drug. It preys on dopamine… It is really hard to keep a positive relationship with it… Use carefully, or at least consciously."

(18-year-old boy)

Parents' Advice on Teen Social Media Use

Advice Themes (counts)

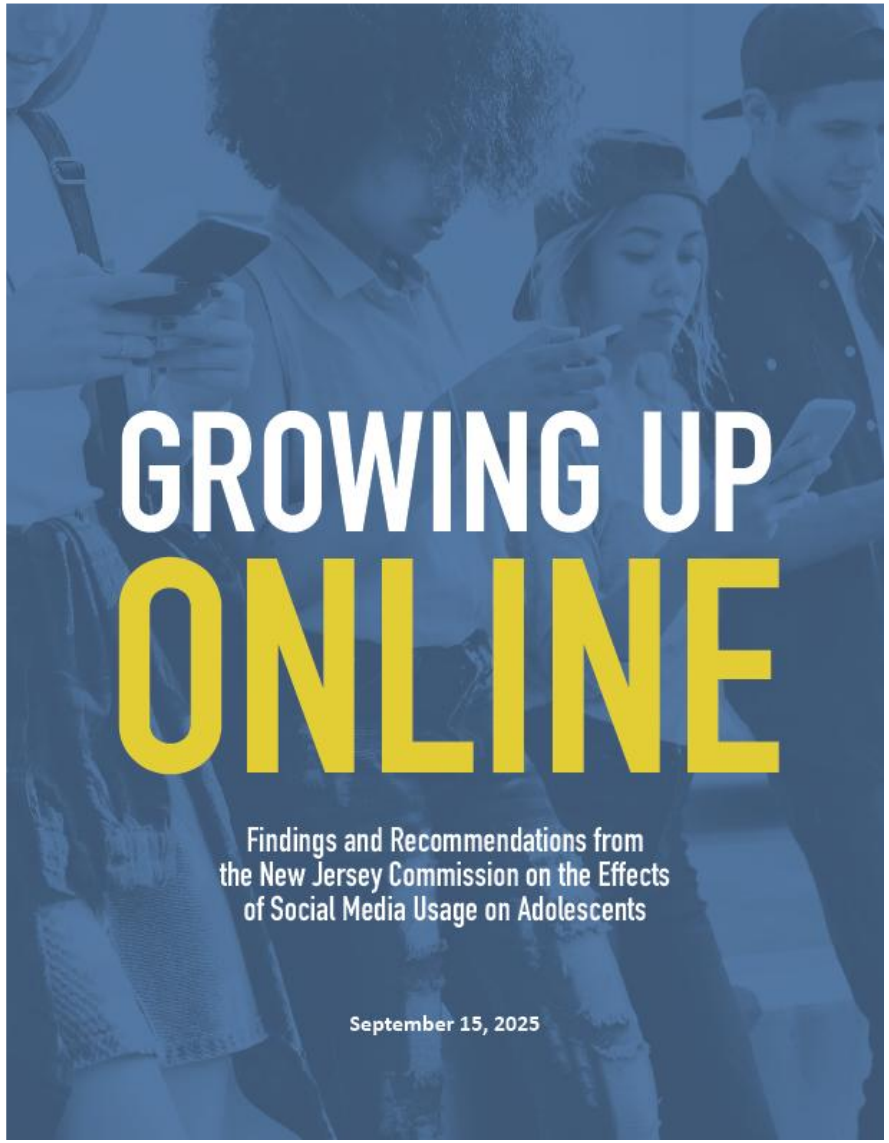
- Monitor (91)
- Moderate (46)
- Engage (46)
- Delay (33)
- Prohibit (28)
- Model (8)

"Parents' relationship to their children's social media use probably mirrors the overall relationship. Parents might best model the behavior they want to see and offer open communication while respecting personal boundaries."

(Parent of 18-year-old boy)

Student Well-Being & Engagement
Strategies for School Leaders & Families

Findings & Recommendations



Promoting Best Outcomes for Youth

Two Overall Strategies

Implement Social Media Limits & Boundaries

Adult-Child Discussion Around Social Media Use

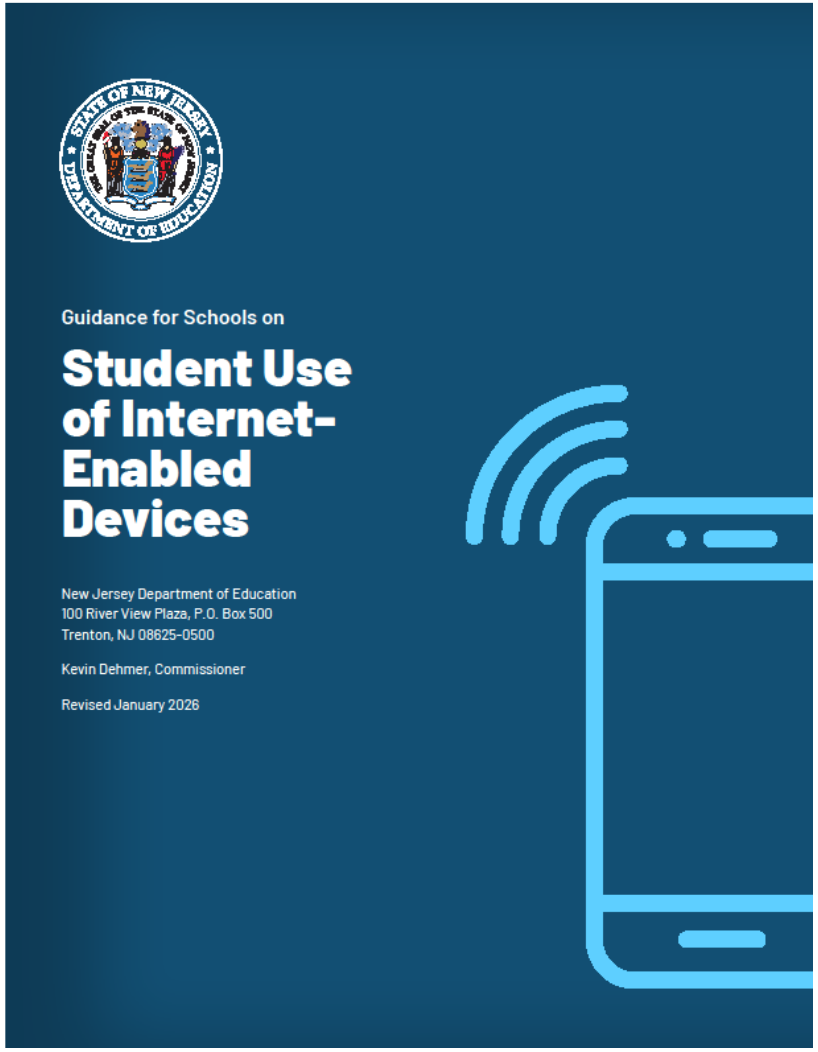
Implement Bell-to-Bell Cell Phone Ban

Reduces classroom disruptions and distractions

Improves student focus and ability to learn

Encourages social connections between students

Provides students with a break from being social media pressure to be “constantly connected” for fear of missing out



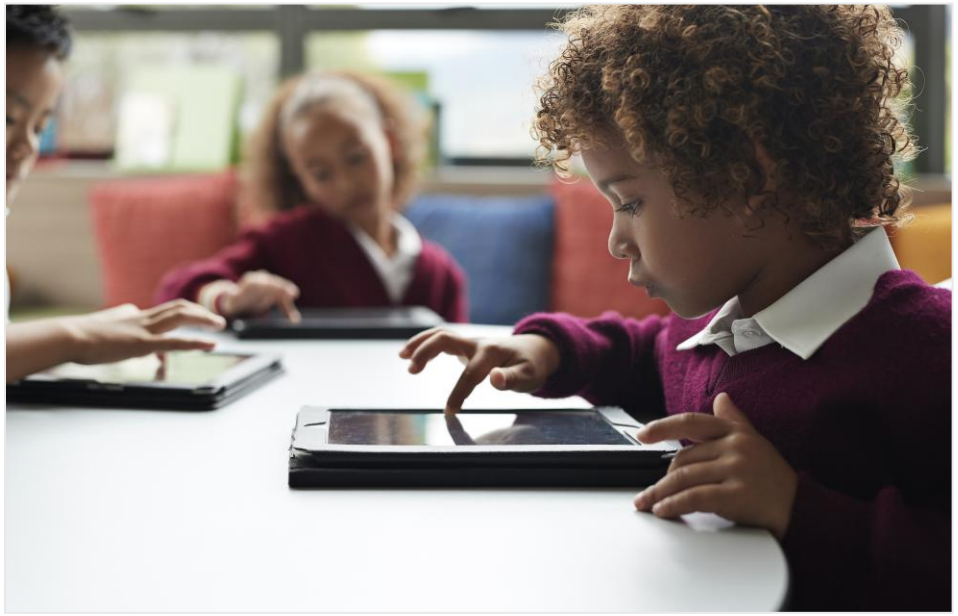
Educators: Evaluate Overall Use of Technology
Sample Reflection Questions

- Does the use of technology **meaningfully improve** the learning experience or outcome?
- Are students getting an appropriate **balance** of screen-based and screen-free learning experiences?
- Is technology helping students **engage** and concentrate, or contributing to distraction and multitasking?
- Are students getting sufficient **opportunities** for face-to-face discussion, collaboration, creativity, and hands-on learning?

Families: Evaluate Overall Use of Technology
Sample Reflection Questions

- Is my child using technology for a **clear and positive purpose**, or simply out of habit or boredom?
- Is screen time appropriately **balanced** with sleep, physical activity, family time, hobbies, and face-to-face interaction?
- How does technology use appear to affect my child's **mood, stress level, attention, and overall well-being**?
- Have we established clear and consistent **expectations** for when, where, and how technology is used at home?
- Are the adults in our home **modeling the healthy technology habits** we want our children to develop?

Provide Age-Appropriate Instruction
Digital Citizenship & Media Literacy



Increases chance of positive social media experiences

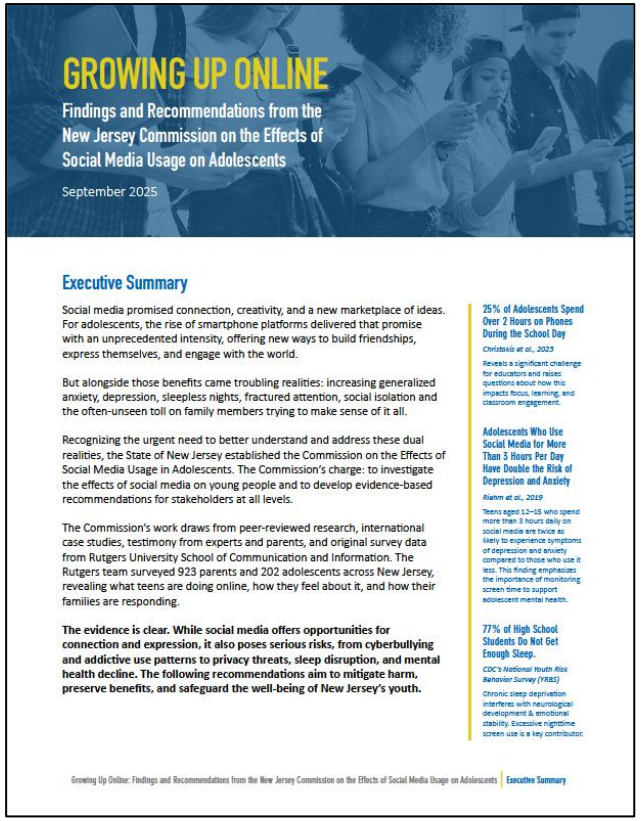
Supports students to:

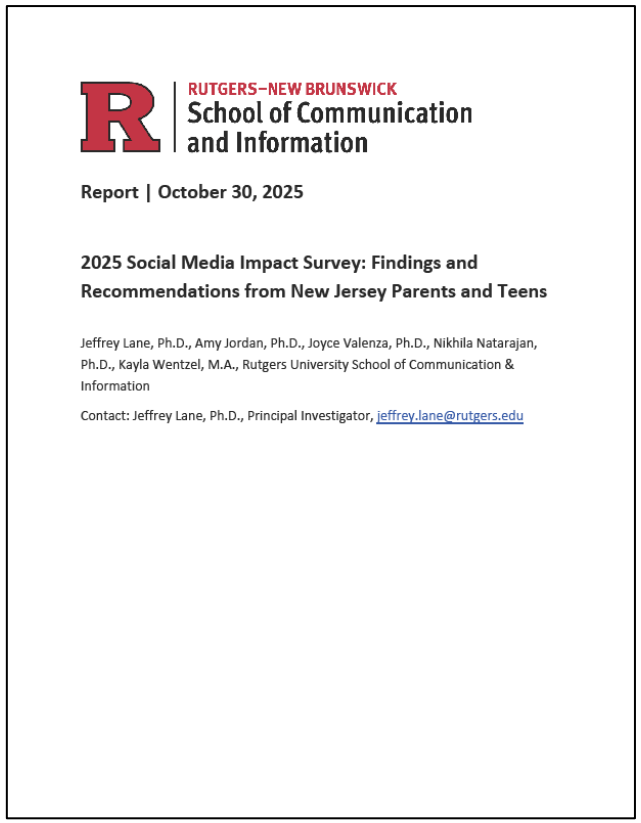
- Build critical thinking skills and evaluate social media content
- Promotes responsible technology use
- Strengthens online safety and understanding of consequences of sharing information
- Empower students to build healthy online relationships & positively engage in social media
- Recognize signs of problematic social media use
- Understand how to seek help/support for online issues

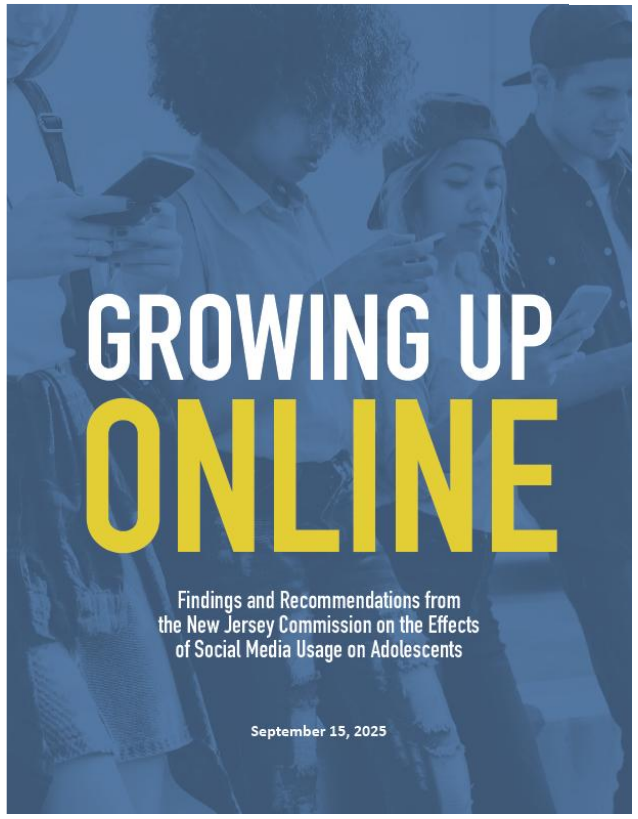
Photo Credit: Microsoft Stock Image

Where Do We Go From Here?
Resources and Next Steps

NJDOE Website
Student Digital Wellness







Resources for Educators

- **NJDOE Standards Transparency and Mastery Platform**
- **Digital Citizenship Curriculum**
  - Lesson plans and classroom resources on digital literacy, privacy, and online respect.
- **Digital Citizenship Resource List**
  - Research-based strategies for integrating digital health into teaching practices.
- **Parent & Educator's Guide to Media Literacy and False Information**
  - Easy-to-use resource designed to empower adults to build students' critical thinking skills around media consumption.
- **Digital Safety Resources for the Classroom**
  - Interactive curriculum for grades 2-6 to promote safe and positive online behavior.

Resources for Families

- **Family Digital Wellness Guide** (Boston Children's Hospital Digital Wellness Lab)
  - Best Practices for Birth to Pre-School
  - Best Practices for Grade School to Tween
  - Best Practices for Teen to Young Adult

- **Social Media Guides for Parents** (Common Sense Media)

- **Support to Create a Family Media Plan** (American Academy of Pediatrics)

- **Digital Safety Resources for Families** (Be Internet Awesome with Google)

Ongoing Research is Essential

"This new Center will be an invaluable tool to help us better understand how technology is affecting our children, and more importantly, turn research into real solutions to protect our kids, support our families, and address the ongoing youth mental health crisis."

Governor Mikie Sherrill



RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

New Jersey Social Media Research Center

Research, engagement, and translation to promote youth mental health and wellbeing

Three pillars — assessment, intervention, and prevention — with Year 1 activities and cross-cutting outreach, translation, and policy.

ACTIVITY STATUS YEAR 1 new this year ONGOING already underway

PILLAR 1 · ASSESSMENT

Understanding Impacts

How do NJ children and families experience social media, and what are the mental health, physical, cognitive, and behavioral impacts?

RESEARCH

- YEAR 1 Wave 2 of the NJ Social Media Impact Study: children 10+, addictive use
- ONGOING Funded studies on population health, violence exposure, and suicide risk

BUILDING CAPACITY

- YEAR 1 Survey partnership with Rutgers–Eagleton/SSRS; recruitment through school partners
- ONGOING Building the first state-level longitudinal dataset on youth social media use

YEAR 1 YIELDS

A longitudinal dataset no other state has, plus reports within 6–12 months.

BUILDING TOWARD · YEARS 2–3

- NJ's standing statewide survey, reaching younger residents
- Permanent data infrastructure and analytic staffing

PILLAR 2 · INTERVENTION

Mitigating Harm

What reduces harmful and addictive use — across platform design, modifiable behaviors, and family regulation strategies?

RESEARCH

- YEAR 1 Focus groups with 40 NJ teens, then a youth-informed warning label experiment
- ONGOING NIMH-funded study of high-risk youth at three clinical sites, including Rutgers UBHC

BUILDING CAPACITY

- YEAR 1 Add timed warning delivery and behavioral tracking for reuse in future studies
- ONGOING Adapting the open-source Mock Social Media Website Tool

YEAR 1 YIELDS

A harm-mitigation framework, warning specifications, and a reusable platform.

BUILDING TOWARD · YEARS 2–3

- Clinical interventions for youth already struggling
- Industry and policy mitigation: platform design standards

PILLAR 3 · PREVENTION

Promoting Healthy Use

How can we support healthy, responsible social media use among NJ children, families, and communities?

RESEARCH

- YEAR 1 Free online courses for NJ schools and families: Quick Tips, brief and interactive modules
- ONGOING Youth co-designed sleep program reaching 1,000+ NJ adolescents

BUILDING CAPACITY

- YEAR 1 Build a partner network of schools, clinics, and community organizations
- ONGOING Health Messages & Campaign Design course, building campaigns from Wave 1 data

YEAR 1 YIELDS

Courses free to every NJ school and family, and a Digital Wellbeing Curriculum.

BUILDING TOWARD · YEARS 2–3

- A full suite of programs, evaluated for lasting change
- Parent-focused courses and in-person supports

EVALUATE → ADAPT → EXPAND programming and policy guidance for schools, parents, clinicians, communities, and State policymakers

CROSS-CUTTING OUTREACH, TRANSLATION & POLICY

Two channels that carry the work of all three pillars into New Jersey

Public & community engagement

- SMRC website as New Jersey's centralized repository for social media resources
- School and district outreach through partner networks reaching 37 NJ districts
- Workshops and live Q&A for youth, parents, clinicians, and educators, plus community events and fairs
- Social media channels with content co-created by the RISE youth advisory board
- Stakeholder meetings for each pillar, an External Advisory Council, and a cross-sector convening

Government & policy engagement with the NJ State Policy Lab

- Policy briefs, plain-language summaries, and infographics as findings become available
- NJ policy landscape review of statutes, pending legislation, and district policies
- SMRC Day at the State House with legislators and agency officials
- Standing partnerships with NJ DoE and related State agencies
- Tracked responses to State agency research requests, reported annually to the Governor and Legislature

SUSTAINABILITY PATHWAY

How Year 1 activities translate into long-term support

- Federal — NIH, IES, NSF, and AHRQ, with NIMH the team's primary funder to date
- State — continued DoE sponsorship, NJ Department of Health, and a role in Meta settlement funds directed to youth online safety
- Foundation — RWJF, Community Foundation of NJ, Pincus, William T. Grant, AFSP, and AASM
- Earned and in-kind — sliding-scale fees for external organizations; Rutgers in-kind support for 3–5 years

CURRENT PIPELINE

$383K under review across two social media grants (NIH and Rutgers); R01 submissions planned for February 2027 ($2.5M) and June 2027 ($2.0M).

Questions?



Contact Us

Kelly Allen
Office of Student Support Services
New Jersey Department of Education
Kelly.Allen@doe.nj.gov

Dr. Jeffrey Lane
School of Communication & Information
Rutgers University
Jeffrey.Lane@rutgers.edu

nj.gov/education

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